Chapter 4
Ethnographic Research on the Sex Industry: The Ambivalence of Ethical Guidelines

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Introduction

My phone rings for a few seconds and then stops. One missed call from Rea. Rea is a young Albanian woman working in a bar in Kosovo. During our meetings in this bar, Rea told me how her father arranged for her to go on various trips to western Europe, where she was forced into prostitution. Rea did not want to live at home anymore as soon as she realised that her father was involved in the exploitation she encountered abroad. She decided to go and live and work in a bar in South Kosovo. The bar functions as a meeting ground for clients and women involved in prostitution. Rea still sends part of her earnings to her family. I return Rea's call. She has news: '*I told the bar owner that I am leaving. He was irritated but I told him that there is another life for me. I am going. Can you help me? I trust you. No other people*."[1]

Rea's question lays bare some of the ethical complexities of ethnographic research on the sex industry. Ethnographic research methods are qualitative by nature and aim at understanding the actual experience of people involved by entering a scene, staying there for an extended period of time, holding in-depth interviews and making (participant) observations (Fleisher 1998, p. 53; Decorte and Zaitch 2010, pp. 264–265). These methods often lead to emotional engagement between ethnographic researchers and respondents (see also: Fleetwood 2009; Decorte and Zaitch 2010, p. 300, 552; Fleisher 1998, p. 62; Tunnell 1998, pp. 211–212; Adler 1993). During my ethnographic fieldwork in Kosovo, this engagement resulted in Rea asking me for help. In the *WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing*

[1] I returned Rea's call with the help of my Albanian-speaking research assistant Ms. Dafina Muçaj to whom I am grateful for her professional cooperation and thoughtful support. The phone call was made on 5 December 2011 when I was in Kosovo conducting ethnographic research on the local sex industry.

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Trafficked Women, Zimmerman and Watts (2003, pp. 24–25) outline that offering help is an ethical and moral obligation. However, offering it in the wrong way can worsen the situation as well as influence 'natural' observation methods. Help should therefore be considered carefully.

This chapter discusses the safety and ethical dilemmas that arise from conducting ethnographic research on the sex industry. I focus on ethical concerns for researching women along the whole continuum from voluntary sex workers to forced victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation, as well as all possible forms in between these extremes.[2] I start by examining the question of whether it is ethical to carry out ethnographic research among women who are involved in the sex industry and are potential victims of trafficking. Arguing that a study on the sex industry cannot exclude the actual women involved, I continue by addressing ethical and safety concerns aimed at the protection of respondents and researchers. Guiding principles such as 'do no harm', informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and clarity about the role and responsibility of researchers can advise researchers on how to deal with certain situations. Yet, following the general guidelines does not guarantee successful research on the sex industry, and imposing the guidelines on researchers, as institutional review boards tend to do, can hamper research progress. The ambivalence concerning their practical applicability is discussed through concrete examples from ethnographic fieldwork on prostitution and human trafficking in Kosovo and Italy.

Since 2011, I have been studying how war and post-war transition processes shape the Kosovar sex industry. During various fieldwork periods, I made a habit out of spending several days and evenings a week in bars and motels where prostitution was taking place. I hung out with women when they were waiting for customers; joined them for lunch, drinks or necessary visits to institutions; discussed 'business' with bar owners and observed them being offered new employees. Additionally, I spent time with a woman who used to be involved in prostitution but was now in witness protection, held in-depth interviews with local experts on human trafficking and prostitution and followed court cases in this field. In some cases, I reflect on ethical and safety concerns springing from one of my earlier studies among the Romanian women involved in street prostitution in Rome, Italy, after Romania had entered the European Union in 2007.[3]

[2] Victims of trafficking are defined in the 'UN Optional Protocol to Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children'. The Trafficking Protocol entered into force on 25 December 2003 and supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

[3] I conducted this fieldwork from February until June 2007 within the framework of a Master's degree in cultural anthropology.

Research Among Women Involved in the Sex Industry

Unethical: Arguments Against Including Women

During in-depth anthropological research on the sex industry and people's lives after trafficking, Brennan (2005, p. 37) faced methodological difficulties and ethical concerns related to 'doing research with ex-captives who are both an extremely vulnerable population, as well as one that is extraordinarily diverse […].' Women involved in prostitution, irrespective of their voluntary or forced entry into the business, are often considered to be vulnerable because of the high risk of being subjected to exploitation (Cwikel and Hoban 2005, p. 309; Kelly 2003). This vulnerability, especially of victims of trafficking, makes some scholars plead for excluding current (potential) victims of trafficking from research (Tyldum 2010).

One of the main arguments put forward is that research in which victims of trafficking are identified, interviewed and then left in their exploitative situation, is not ethical since it 'is likely to ruin any belief the victim had in humanity, or any hope of being rescued' (Tyldum 2010, p. 3). Yet, conducting research among women who are already participating in assistance programmes is regarded as less problematic since service providers can easily be accessed in case women in assistance programmes express certain needs (Brunovskis and Surtees 2010, p. 13) or feel anxious after an interview (Tyldum 2010).

In my understanding, excluding current potential victims of trafficking would, however, mean excluding *all* women involved in the sex industry at the time of research as it is difficult to decide beforehand whether or not a woman could be regarded as a victim of trafficking. This line of argumentation would, thus, lead to former victims of trafficking in assistance programmes being the only ethically defendable group of respondents in studies on the sex industry.

Impossibility of Excluding: Arguments for Including Women

Interviewing women in the relatively safe context of assistance programmes indeed offers the above-mentioned valuable advantages. However, research based on interviews with victims of trafficking in assistance programmes is only representative of the situation of this specific group (see also: Tyldum 2010). No reliable conclusions can be drawn about the situation of trafficking victims or the sex industry at large since interviews and observations in different settings (e.g. a shelter or brothel) and stages in life (e.g. before, during or after involvement in the sex industry) provide different narratives. For instance, during my fieldwork in Rome, I observed that women involved in prostitution at the time of the conversation often emphasised that they were working without a pimp, especially when the conversation took place at the police station after they had been arrested, whereas women involved in assistance programmes generally presented themselves as forced victims (de Wildt

2009; see also: Brunovskis and Surtees 2010, p. 14). In the literature, two main explanations are given for these different narratives in different settings.

First, people interpret and evaluate their experiences differently over time (Nordstrom and Robben 1995, pp. 12–13). This means that it is possible for a woman to assess her involvement in the sex industry in one way when she is still involved, while she evaluates it in another way after she has left the business (Brunovskis and Surtees 2010, p. 14). A young Serbian woman in a shelter in Kosovo told me that her former pimps would sometimes lock her up, use violence if she did not want to have intercourse with a client and encourage her to experiment with drugs, but '*after some time you start, in a way, to accept it. That is what you do. You see it as a normal life. But it was not*'.[4] As stressed by Nordstrom and Robben (1995, pp. 12–13) on the difference between contemporary and posterior accounts: 'Truth and understanding are […] always conditional and situated', which leads to diverging accounts depending on the moment a woman speaks about her experiences in the sex industry.

The second explanation supposes that in different settings, one meets different women with different experiences altogether. In Kosovo, I met various women in premises where prostitution was taking place who had been well-earning sex workers as well as exploited victims of trafficking at different periods in their lives. Oksana from Ukraine, for instance, explained: '*With the money I earned [in Kosovo RdW] I bought an apartment. I also put heating in the floor. […] I went on holidays with Anna [Oksana's daughter RdW]. She saw Egypt on television in cartoons. And I want her to see those things. I spent a lot of money. You only live once. I went on a lot of holidays. Took all of my family*'.[5] Her life had not always been so prosperous. A few years earlier, Oksana worked in a brothel in Spain. Contrary to prior agreements, the Spanish brothel owner only paid her a few euros per client and initially did not allow her to return to Ukraine. This experience stopped Oksana from working in the sex industry for some years, but she was eventually persuaded to go back by a friend's stories of large earnings to be made in prostitution in Kosovo. In my experience, women interviewed in assistance programmes seldom have nuanced accounts of a past in which they were both affluent sex workers and victims. The cases of women who are known by the police and are receiving help are likely to be distinct from unknown cases, precisely because they have become visible to institutions. Institutions, after all, can be expected to first and foremost identify clearly recognisable exploitation of, for instance, minors or women with nationalities known for their involvement in trafficking (Tyldum and Brunovskis 2005, p. 24). Women who experienced more mundane forms of pressure and control, who knew they would be involved in prostitution, but not about the exploitative conditions, or who already had experience in prostitution are often underrepresented in analyses of accounts of women encountered through assistance programmes and police. This encountering of more stereotypical stories through institutions (i.e. selection bias) is further intensified if institutions put forward their more 'exemplary cases' for

[4] Interview with Vesna on 20 March 2013.

[5] Informal conversation with Oksana on 8 January 2014.

involvement in research (Tyldum and Brunovskis 2005, pp. 22–26; Brunovskis and Surtees 2010, p. 14).

I would like to add a third possible explanation for differing narratives in different settings. Women involved in prostitution might deliberately put an emphasis on certain aspects of their story, depending on the situation they are in. As anthropologist Ghorashi (2003, p. 34) underlines in her account on individual agency: ‘When people tell their stories they identify themselves with one or another group or reject some external identification made of them by a dominant society’. Women can, thus, deliberately place themselves in a certain group by presenting their story in a certain way. Barsky (1994) describes the process whereby individuals consciously create a specific image of themselves as ‘constructing a productive other’. The productivity of a story is key. Women tell the story that helps them achieve their aim. Women involved in street prostitution in Rome, for instance, often presented themselves as independent sex workers during contacts with the police, in order to be left alone. Yet, in the process of being allowed access to help from nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), women often emphasised their victimisation (De Wildt 2009). The presentation of such productive stories is especially likely if no rapport has been established between the researcher and the respondent and the women are interviewed during one-time encounters.

Taken together, divergent evaluations of experiences over time, selection bias and people’s tendency to tell productive life stories all explain why a researcher will find different narratives in different settings. Research that is solely focused on victims of trafficking in assistance programmes will inevitably result in very specific accounts, which, in my experience, are more likely to reproduce symbolic and stereotypical images of helpless victims of trafficking (as opposed to ‘voluntary’ sex workers). These prevailing images deny women’s ‘resistance to structural inequalities and their struggle to transform their lives’ (Andrijasevic 2007, p. 98). Ethnographic research among women involved in the sex industry over an extended period of time provides more nuanced narratives and will broaden our understanding of human trafficking and prostitution. For instance, such narratives provide insight into the agreements these women have made with the facilitators of prostitution or with human traffickers in order to realise their goals of improving their own or their family’s economic situation, leaving an oppressive or less than inspiring home situation or experiencing adventure.

Towards a ‘Thick’ Description of the Sex Industry

I, thus, argue for including women involved in the sex industry at the time of research in studies on prostitution in order to arrive at what Geertz (1973, p. 15) called ‘thick description’ and grasp the multiplicity of experiences of women involved in the sex industry and the intertwinement with the context they find themselves in. This asks for inclusion of a broad range of women in research: women who are currently involved in the sex industry as well as women who have been so in the past,

women who are seen as voluntary sex workers, women who are identified as forced victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation and all the possibilities in between these extremes. I prefer to approach these women through different channels and talk to them in various settings, such as brothels, health clinics, police stations and shelters as well as 'neutral' places like a restaurant or at home. And, lastly, I prefer to combine ethnographic research methodologies based on observations, in-depth interviews and the recording of life histories of trafficked persons as well as individuals and groups involved in prostitution (see for example: Dewalt and Dewalt 2002) with other 'grounded' research methods: the analysis of court cases (e.g. Leman and Janssens 2008) and police and official reports. All of these research settings bring their own biases, but when combined, these stories and observations can provide a 'thick' and multifaceted description of the sex industry (see also: Cwikel and Hoban 2005, p. 13; O'Connell Davidson 1998, p. 7; Brunovskis and Surtees 2010, pp. 8, 26–27).

Ethical and Safety Concerns in Research on the Sex Industry

Observations in bars and informal conversations or interviews with pimps and women involved in prostitution can put both respondents and researchers in challenging situations. The *WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women* (Zimmerman and Watts 2003) outline the risks for respondents, in this case specifically victims of trafficking. As an example, the recommendations present the case of a researcher who made a documentary about trafficked women but did not sufficiently mask the interviewees. The victims, including a woman who had kept her experience a secret from her husband and parents, were easily identified (Zimmerman and Watts 2003, p. 19). At the same time, risk for the researcher is inherent in research on crime and deviance (Hamm and Ferrell 1998, p. 264). This is illustrated by the experience of criminologist Bruce Jacobs (1998, pp. 160–174), who was robbed at gunpoint by one of his informants during his research among crack dealers due to the latter's disapproval of Jacob's behaviour towards him.

The following sections consider potential risks related to conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the sex industry, together with possible ways (i.e. guidelines) to manage these risks. General ethical guidelines such as the principles of 'do no harm', informed consent, confidentiality (see also: Decorte and Zaitch 2010; May 2011) and the researcher's role and responsibility are discussed while considering the ambivalence in their practical applicability during research on the sex industry. The general guidelines do not offer exhaustive answers to the challenges faced by researchers in the field of sex trafficking. They can advise a researcher, but, in the end, he or she has to decide which approach is best suited to the specific circumstances. A researcher needs this freedom in order to acquire a level of understanding of people's experiences in a relatively hidden realm such as the sex industry that goes beyond the 'falsehoods and deceptions to front out others, such as researchers,

and sometimes even themselves' (Douglas 1976, p. 9). This is not to say that anything goes. My argument is that considering general guidelines will allow researchers to go into the field well prepared and can help prevent them from jeopardising the safety of both their informants and themselves, but forcing the guidelines on researchers is no guarantee to success and will only limit ethnographic research possibilities.

Do No Harm

The central principle in social research is to do no harm (Decorte and Zaitch 2010). As Bryman (2004, p. 509) outlines in his book on social research methods, harm can refer to 'physical harm; harm to respondent's development; loss of self-esteem; stress; and inducing subjects to perform reprehensible acts'. In the framework of research on the sex industry, this could, for instance, mean that women encounter stress as a result of the topics discussed or verbal or physical violence by the owner of the premises where they are working because he feels threatened by their participation in the research. Zimmerman and Watts (2003, pp. 5–12) recommend not conducting an interview with a woman if it might cause any of these forms of harm. Such a decision asks for the assessment of possible risks in making the initial contact, establishing the time and place of meetings and, eventually, winding down the relationship. During my fieldwork in Kosovo, I tried to assess and mitigate the risks in contacting and speaking with women involved in prostitution in four ways.

First of all, I made assessments of possible harms through gatekeepers: the organisation or person that arranged access to the bar, motel, house or street where the women were working. In the beginning of my fieldwork in Kosovo, I established contacts in premises where prostitution was taking place by joining an outreach organisation involved in distributing condoms and information about sexually transmitted infections. Some of the women with whom I established good relationships subsequently took me to other premises where they introduced me to friends or acquaintances who were also involved in prostitution. Through preparatory conversations with the respective gatekeepers, I always made an effort to understand as much as possible about the particular social power dynamics in the bar or motel before entering. It was, for instance, relevant to know which woman was in a relationship with the owner of the premises and more or less functioned as his eyes and ears as I noticed that women felt less free to talk about working conditions in the presence of the owner's girlfriend. Likely, they were afraid that the girlfriend would inform the bar owner about possible negative remarks that could hamper their working relationship. Such details were relevant to know in order to avoid conversations that could be experienced as unpleasant by respondents.

The second way in which I assessed the situation of women involved in prostitution in specific premises was through conversations about a certain working place with other women involved in prostitution. The women usually hear many things through the grapevine. Gossip between the women or between women and barkeep-

ers or clients can provide useful information about the working conditions in certain bars, the attitudes of certain pimps and so on.

But thirdly, and most importantly, in order to assess discomfort or risks, I explicitly asked the women about possible concerns during our conversations. Examples of questions in this regard are: 'Do you have any concerns about speaking with me?' and 'Do you feel this is a good time and place to discuss your experiences? If not, is there a better time and place?' (Zimmerman and Watts 2003, pp. 5–12). The answers to these questions could convey worries that were not immediately evident to me. This assessment of the right time and place to talk with the women in order to avoid harm becomes easier when you get to know the women better. Once contact was established, I usually called them first before visiting their place of work. This provided them with an opportunity to tell me that it was not a good time because they were too busy to speak, because there had been a police raid and the situation was a bit tense or because a jealous boyfriend needed all their attention.

Lastly, in order to avoid distress during interviews or informal conversations, I generally try not to ask questions that might provoke an emotionally charged response (e.g. about children the women have not seen in a long time) or judgemental questions (e.g. 'what will your family think of you now?'; Zimmerman and Watts 2003, pp. 23–25). Sometimes, I do not ask any questions at all; instead, I listen to what the women decide to share or not share (Brennan 2005, p. 45). The women are then in charge of the pace and direction of the conversation (Zimmerman and Watts 2003, pp. 23–25). At the same time, it allows me to get a feeling for the women's situation. After asking them how they are, the women generally start talking about what is on their mind, ranging from fights with other women working in the bar to experiences with certain customers or their relations with family members. Meeting women like this over an extended period of time provided me with rich insights into their daily concerns. The importance of this approach is also acknowledged by Polsky (1967, pp. 128–129), who recommends researchers: 'initially, keep your eyes and ears open but *keep your mouth shut*'. This is especially valuable when the interview takes place within earshot of, for instance, boyfriends or bar owners. Their presence will influence the information a woman may be willing to share. According to Cwikel and Hoban (2005, p. 312), it is advisable in such situations to 'record the woman's statement without intervening'.

In my experience, possible harm can be limited by making sure that the first visit to a new research premises is made in the company of a trusted gatekeeper (e.g. a representative of an outreach organisation, a woman currently working there or a friend of a woman working there). It is also advisable to confirm follow-up meetings by phone a few minutes before arrival, to ask the women if the agreed-on time and place are still convenient when meeting them and to more or less follow their stories as well as one's own intuition. Still, there are no guarantees that no harm will be done. Researchers and respondents cannot always anticipate the consequences of participating in research interviews. For instance, an Albanian woman enthusiastically invited me to visit her in the bar where she was working as a prostitute, but when I arrived, her female boss scolded her for bringing in an outsider. On another occasion, a Kosovar bar owner threatened to use violence against me and the two

Roma women working for him if we did not pay him for the time we spent together. The precautionary measures I took made it somewhat easier to decide whether or not a conversation should proceed, but I could not always anticipate the outcome of such a decision.

Informed Consent

Similar to ‘do no harm’, informed consent is a fundamental principle in any social research project. It implies that the respondents in a study should be given all the information needed to make an informed decision about their participation. This ranges from ensuring that the respondent is fully aware that he or she is participating in a research project to providing insight into the actual research process and its possible implications (Bryman 2004, pp. 511–513; Noaks and Wincup 2004, pp. 45–47; May 2011, p. 62). This entailed, for instance, that my respondents and I discussed how I could use their stories and experiences in future books or publications about their lives without compromising their anonymity.

The institutional research boards in some countries recommend asking respondents to first sign a form in order to prove that informed consent has been gained (Decorte and Zaitch 2010, p. 540). In practice, it can be challenging to obtain fully informed consent or signed consent forms. This is especially true for respondents working in the sex industry (Zimmerman and Watts 2003, pp. 19–20). These women are often reluctant to sign documents with their real names (which they do not always reveal) and may feel obliged to do so if the contact is established through the social workers assigned to their case. Not all of them are aware of the fact that declining to participate will not affect the assistance they are receiving (Cwikel and Hoban 2005, p. 311; Brunovskis and Surtees 2010, p. 18).

Moreover, asking respondents to sign documents in premises where prostitution is taking place can have negative effects. On the rare occasions that I wrote something in my notebook in a bar, I immediately aroused the suspicion of bystanders, such as clients who were not aware of or involved in the research. They would look at me askance or question me about my intentions, which resulted in an unpleasant atmosphere. Waving around official forms and asking respondents to sign them would have likely made matters worse (and me an unwelcome guest). Institutional research boards’ possible demand for signed informed consent forms can obstruct research or make it impossible to conduct fieldwork at all (see also: Adler and Adler 1998: xiv).

Furthermore, written consent forms do not benefit respondents but primarily protect researchers and the institutions they work for. If participation in a research project somehow harms a respondent, even though the agreements on the consent form (e.g. anonymity) were never violated, researchers and institutions can hide behind the consent forms signed by their respondents. The above-mentioned Albanian woman who invited me to her place of work and was reprimanded by her boss would have had no problem with signing a consent form if had I insisted upon her

doing so. If the bar owner had used violence against her, a consent form would have proved that she had consented to me visiting her and thereby shift the responsibility for further negative consequences. Written consent forms would have protected me rather than my respondents.

With regard to obtaining informed consent from women involved in the sex industry, I therefore agree with Cwikel and Hoban (2005, p. 311), who allow for verbal instead of written informed consent. Respondents have a right to be informed about their participation in a research project, but this can also be discussed verbally. A written confirmation of consent does not benefit respondents but only protects researchers and the institutions they work for.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

I usually start my interviews by explaining the precautionary measures I take to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. The respondents' personal information and the contents of the interviews will not be shared with others, and personal details will be altered in publications (Noaks and Wincup 2004, pp. 48–49). Respondents have to be able to count on this guarantee on their privacy, and any publications in which a respondent can be identified (as happened in the example mentioned above) must be avoided at all costs.

In my experience, the trust of informants that the researcher will respect their anonymity and confidentiality grows over time. First interviews often provide rather 'standard' descriptions of the situation of women involved in prostitution. I found that many women, bar owners and other respondents only opened up to me after seeing me around for weeks or months without any change in their situation (such as more frequent police raids). The detailed and more nuanced stories that gave me a deeper understanding of the sex industry were often only revealed gradually over time.

In research on criminal offenses such as trafficking and (in some countries) prostitution, researchers sometimes find themselves pressured by authorities or law enforcement agencies to disclose information about specific informants (Sluka 1995; Tunnell 1998; Ferrell and Hamm 1998; Polsky 1967). This makes it all the more important to think critically about the exact meaning of assuring anonymity and confidentiality. As noted by Polsky (1967, pp. 139–140):

> If one is effectively to study adult criminals in their natural settings, he [the researcher RdW] must make the moral decision that in some ways he will break the law himself. He need not be a 'participant' observer and commit the criminal acts under study, yet he has to witness such acts or be taken into confidence about them and not blow the whistle. That is, the investigator has to decide that when necessary he will 'obstruct justice' or have 'guilty knowledge' or be an 'accessory' before or after the fact, in the full legal sense of those terms.

Polsky (1967, p. 142) finds it acceptable for a social scientist to withhold 'guilty knowledge' since the obligation of ordinary citizens to champion for the outcomes

of justice is inappropriate and even 'highly inimical' to social scientists in the field of crime. This view is shared by Adler (1993, p. 24), who feels it would have been impossible to conduct her study on upper-level drug dealers without having guilty knowledge, making guilty observations and being involved in (minor) guilty actions. However, as shown by the case of the then doctoral student of sociology, Rik Scarce (1994), adherence to this principle can have serious consequences. Scarce was jailed for 5 months for refusing to disclose information on the environmental activists he was studying at the time of his arrest.

Such an outcome should clearly be prevented, with the most important safeguard being: open discussions about the goals and methods of ethnographic research with law enforcement agencies. This is not to admit that the goals of my ethnographic studies are tuned to the goals of law enforcement, but to say that the aims of ethnographic research on the sex industry and the aims of law enforcement in the field of human trafficking and prostitution are distinct but can be mutually beneficial as long as the one does not interfere with the work of the other.

In general, data from law enforcers and ethnographic researchers are different in the sense that judicial bodies collect intelligence and, mostly, already know the names of premises where trafficking and prostitution are taking place as well as the names of the people involved. Judicial bodies, therefore, rarely depend on information from ethnographic researchers who, on the other hand, gather information about the lived experiences of people involved in these scenes (Inciardi et al. 1993, p. 150). However, data from investigations conducted by law enforcers can be of interest to researchers (e.g. transcripts of telephone taps), while insights into the daily concerns of women involved in prostitution can be relevant for authorities. In Kosovo, the acknowledgement of each other's aims and working methods allowed for regular meetings with police, special prosecutors and policy makers. As a result, I was asked to join prosecutors during hearings of defendants in trafficking cases and to participate in inter-ministerial working group meetings on anti-trafficking, during which I laid out various problems faced by women involved in the sex industry, such as limited access to medical assistance.

I, therefore, highly value the protection of openness, but I have also experienced that it takes time to establish mutual respect and confidentiality. And even when these have been established, there is always a fine line to walk. Unlike lawyers, social scientists are not bound by professional confidentiality to protect them from being called as witnesses. The exact meaning of guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality should therefore be well-considered.

In keeping with full disclosure, I also told my respondents involved in the sex industry about my relationship with law enforcement agencies. Bar owners, pimps and the women involved in my research in Kosovo all knew that I regularly met with special prosecutors and police officers. They trusted me not to disclose any personal details to the authorities. This openness about the range of my connections proved valuable when, one day, I was in the passenger seat of a car of the special prosecution office, which was clearly recognisable as such. I had joined the prosecutor to attend a hearing in a human trafficking case, but we got lost on our way to the courthouse. The driver pulled over to ask a passer-by for directions and I

happened to recognise the bartender of one of the premises I used to frequent in the context of my research. He pointed us in the right direction and when I next visited his bar, we both had a good laugh about it. Without complete openness about my various working methods, including my contacts with the police, this event could have had serious consequences for me as well as my research project.

This encounter should, of course, also not have happened during my first weeks in the field, as my confidential relationships with the bar owners only grew over time. During my first visits, the owners often tried to gloss over their involvement in the facilitation of prostitution. They presented the women as waitresses and tried to steer the conversations away from prostitution. My presence was, however, accepted. The bar owners must have had various reasons; most probably, they did not want to arouse suspicion by refusing me entrance or were curious about what I was doing. Last but not least, people like to talk about themselves, and that includes the facilitators of prostitution. The bar owners seemed to enjoy explaining to me how they ended up in the prostitution business and shared anecdotes about the journeys of the women who came to work for them from abroad, about violent clients and about their relationship with other bar owners. Some were interested in comparing their experiences in prostitution with the situation in The Netherlands. After some months and many more encounters, prostitution could be discussed more openly with some, but not all, bar owners, and only after trust and confidentiality had been established.

Two more safeguards in regard to confidentiality and anonymity are worth mentioning. Firstly, I prefer not to know the exact identity of my informants. I never asked the women for their full or real names. Occasionally, a woman would try to show me her papers (for instance, after a conversation on working permits or border crossings), but I always told them not to do so. I generally addressed the women by the pseudonyms they used in the bars or just by their first names. This slightly limited my guilty knowledge. While this is my general starting point, the relationship with some respondents resulted in friendship, Skype conversations when we were far away and family visits when close by. In these cases, I was obviously aware of their names and other personal details.

Secondly, I did not tape my interviews. When the women tell their stories, they can often be identified by certain details, even if all the names are omitted. It is possible to remove personal details from interview transcripts, but this cannot be done with a tape, unless all of it is erased. Not taping interviews and conversations has an additional advantage. By putting a tape recorder on the table, an 'anything but ordinary life situation' (Polsky 1967, pp. 138–139) is constructed. People might be more reluctant to speak on tape about personal and possibly shameful or deviant aspects of their life (see also: Cwikel and Hoban 2005, p. 311). Moreover, taping conversations in premises where prostitution is taking place can make bystanders (e.g. clients not involved in the research and/or not fully informed about it) suspicious, which may lead to an unpleasant atmosphere. I, therefore, opted to write down the data from interviews both during—by jotting down notes and quotes—and immediately after the interview and made sure my notes did not contain any names, contact details or other personal information (Decorte and Zaitch 2010, p. 545). This method has the disadvantage that some quotes will get lost forever.

The Role and Responsibility of the Researcher

When informed consent and agreement on anonymity and confidentiality have been established, the actual research commences. In my experience, most women enjoyed talking to an interested and non-judgemental researcher. The women involved in the sex industry in Kosovo often find themselves in a socially isolated position because prostitution is not accepted by (or hidden from) their family. Generally speaking, their situation does not allow them to develop relationships outside the business. The women mostly interact with their clients and other people working in the bar, and many of them welcome a conversation with an outsider as a break from their conversations with clients, which are often experienced as tedious or unpleasant.

Although I regularly developed relationships with respondents that resembled friendship, researchers are never 'ordinary' friends. Regular conversations about the aim of our meetings and the purpose of my work (to write a book about their experiences) helped to clarify the nature of our relationship. In practice, this did not mean that I would always ask my respondents whether or not they realised that I was still working on my research during every single follow-up conversation. In order to collect relevant data, I also wanted to observe the unfolding of events in prostitution premises without making those involved too self-conscious as a result of the presence of a researcher. Nevertheless, I used to regularly remind my respondents of the fact that I was there for research purposes, both by mentioning the book that I was going to write based on our informal and more structured conversations and by bringing up the fact that I would be leaving at some point.

Having established the role of a researcher means that one is in the field to try to gain an understanding of the experiences of the people involved. Zimmerman and Watts (2003, pp. 24–25), however, consider it an ethical and moral obligation of researchers to also offer help when a respondent asks for immediate assistance. Polsky (1967, pp. 117, 143) is critical of such 'action-oriented research' and considers it 'a sentimental refusal to admit that the goals of sociological research and the goals of social work are always distinct and often in conflict'. He continues by stating that 'the criminologist who refuses fully to recognise this conflict and to resolve it in favour of sociology erects a major barrier to the extraction of knowledge about such crime […].' But is it accurate to speak of 'the extraction of knowledge'? The 'militant' anthropologist Scheper-Hughes (1992, p. 25) sees knowledge derived from social research 'as something produced in human interaction, not merely "extracted" from naïve informants'. The dialogic nature of knowledge made me feel emotionally engaged with my respondents (see also: Fleetwood 2009; Fleisher 1998, p. 62; Tunnell 1998, pp. 211–212). Taking part in the daily lives of women involved in prostitution enabled me not only to see their strength and appreciate their inside jokes but also to witness their struggle to earn enough money for firewood, rent and school fees for their children as well as their ability to endure beatings and other physical hardships. I often felt like giving these women something in return for sharing the details of their lives with me. Since ethnographic fieldwork is, above all, a relational endeavour, I see no objection to making occasional helpful gestures

towards respondents, provided this is done in a carefully considered manner. In the following, I will discuss three ways in which I made such a gesture.

Firstly, researchers can be a source of information, especially for women with little contacts outside the sex industry. Zimmerman and Watts (2003, pp. 12–13) recommend that researchers prepare discrete, written referrals to a range of services, such as shelters, legal aid and free health services. I agree with the value of referrals to free health services if accompanied by a non-judgmental attitude towards women involved in prostitution. However, I am more cautious when it comes to providing women with *written* information about other resources. When bar owners, pimps or other profiteers find out that the women working for them are in possession of information about shelters and similar institutions, this could seriously endanger the safety of the women as well as jeopardise the future of the research project.

Profiteers stand to lose income when a woman leaves and are likely to feel threatened by information about legal procedures or shelters. This can result in violence or other repercussions towards the woman involved. When it becomes apparent that the information was provided by a researcher, this might compromise access to the field and also jeopardise the safety of the researcher (Cwikel and Hoban 2005, p. 312). More importantly, if the researcher gained access to the field through a local organisation (e.g. an outreach health organisation), an intervention can harm their day-to-day work with women involved in prostitution, thereby worsening the situation for many.

This is not to say that referral information to relevant services should never be provided. I have given information on shelters as well as legal aid services verbally. Similar problems are not expected with information on free health services. Bar owners and pimps often find health services relatively harmless. They might even see the benefit of it since healthy women usually bring in more money (Cwikel and Hoban 2005, p. 311).

Secondly, I provided my respondents with practical assistance in, for example, their dealings with institutions. On several occasions, women told me that institutions have a judgemental attitude towards them if staff knows they are involved in the sex industry. My respondent Lumnije, for instance, regularly mentioned the pension she was entitled to receive after her husband died in combat during the war in Kosovo. In order to arrange for the pension to be paid into her account, Lumnije needed to speak with the relevant department in Prishtina. Her visits to the department were always stressful. One official called her a fallen woman and sent her away empty-handed. When Lumnije and I went to the department together, she was treated with courtesy since the workers were unsure about the position of the international woman at her side.[6] Likewise, I made some telephone calls to institutions for Ukrainian Oksana to help arrange her departure from Kosovo.[7] When the women encounter discrimination or difficulties with institutions, researchers are in a sound position to assist.

[6] Meeting with Lumnije on 15 November 2013.

[7] Meetings with Oksana on 6 and 8 January 2014.

Practical assistance can also come in the form of money. As a rule, I do not pay respondents for interviews. People will only disclose information about their lives if they feel like it, irrespective of monetary compensation. In my opinion, giving cash will only stimulate those people to cooperate who are unwilling to talk and are only interested in the money. If they are not willing to talk in the first place, respondents will not disclose information after receiving money either. I, therefore, doubt the value of data received as a result of the compensation provided.

This is not to say that I never provided remuneration for participation. I always tried to pay for drinks, lunches or dinner. 'Tried' since male bar owners and respondents with whom I had established a good relationship preferred to occasionally invite me for food or drinks as well. Furthermore, I sometimes helped long-time respondents in an economic crisis. This was the case with Shqipe, whom I had been meeting approximately once a week for over 6 months, when one evening she seemed particularly distressed. Tears were streaming down her face as she ordered drinks for everyone and said: "*I have seven euros. It's on me. I want to spend all my seven euros*".[8] After we sat down, Shqipe told me that she was about to be evicted from her apartment because she was unable to pay the rent as a result of losing her job in the bar. Although she was reluctant at first, she finally allowed me to give her money for the rent. In a similar financial emergency, I was able to provide a long-term respondent with money for a medical procedure.

Thirdly, sometimes all I could do (and was expected to do) was to show empathy in times of distress. Valbona needed a shoulder to lean on after she had been beaten up by a client.[9] Oksana just wanted to 'hang out' with someone in order not to be alone, while she was waiting for her flight to return to Ukraine and be united with her family after 2 years.[10]

These experiences touch directly on the role and responsibilities of the researcher, which go beyond data extraction: They are also elements of a relational endeavour in which researchers sometimes find themselves in a position to provide respondents with information, practical assistance and care.

To the Rescue

Researchers studying the sex industry may find themselves confronted with women in apparently exploitative situations and feel that providing basic information or assistance is not enough. However, possible 'rescue operations' require careful consideration. Not only because of safety concerns for both respondent and researcher but also because a woman may not share an outsider's assessment of her situation. It can be difficult to understand prostitution (which often involves limited freedom of movement) as a career path that some women opt for in pursuit of the opportuni-

[8] Meeting with Shqipe on 1 October 2013.

[9] Meeting with Valbona on 25 September 2013.

[10] Meetings with Oksana between 3 and 9 January 2014.

ties to travel abroad and earn money (see also: Siegel 2012, p. 263). Zimmerman and Watts (2003, p. 21) therefore emphasise respecting a woman's assessment of her own situation and risks to her safety, while Brunovskis and Surtees (2010, p. 12) underline that a researcher should not intervene without thorough consultation with the respective person.

However, in some situations, women like Rea (who was introduced at the beginning of this chapter) explicitly ask for help. From an ethical stance as well as based on my personal feelings of commitment to the women who participated in my research, I agree with Zimmerman and Watts (2003, p. 25) that the researcher 'should make every attempt to assist the respondent to access the appropriate resource'. However, I am hesitant about embarking on interventions. An intervention, however well-intentioned, may jeopardise the research and, more importantly, worsen the situation of the women. This is likely what happened to Rea, who asked me for help because she was afraid that involving the police would result in the arrest of her father. After much deliberation, I decided to help her. According to Rea, the bar owner was the only person who could stop her from leaving because she owed him money. The gatekeeper, who had initially introduced me to the bar, and I discussed Rea's planned departure with the bar owner. He agreed to her leaving if she first paid her debts and I arranged for a shelter. However, on the night of her departure, an uncle of Rea's showed up at the bar. He prevented her from leaving by emotionally blackmailing her through continued remarks such as '*don't you want to be a good daughter to your family and help them by earning money?*', '*This is your kind of life. Don't be naïve. You don't even have an education*' and '*Why would you trust these people? You barely know them*'. He also made sure that we noticed the gun in his pocket. In the end, Rea stayed in the bar.[11] The lesson I learned was: Do not think you know better how to conduct yourself in the prostitution business than the people involved. The bar owner had probably warned Rea's family about her plans, thereby ensuring that she would stay, without losing face towards the gatekeeper and me.

With hindsight, I believe it would have been better if I had assisted Rea in approaching professional organisations experienced in intervening and discussed the possible role of the police with her.

Conclusion

Highly symbolic and stereotypical images of victims of trafficking and 'voluntary' sex workers are often at the core of debates about the sex industry, even though empirical studies have shown that such images rarely correspond with lived experiences. There is a definite need for ethnographic research among those directly involved in the sex industry, and the findings of such research need to be presented to and discussed by policy makers and NGOs working in the field.

[11] Events on the evening of 8 December 2011.

Ethnographic research on the sex industry raises various ethical and safety dilemmas for both researcher and researched. These dilemmas have been discussed above with the aim of contributing to the discussion on issues concerning both researchers and the people involved in their studies. It is the responsibility of researchers to continuously define and redefine the possible consequences of their actions and deal with dilemmas in a carefully considered way. Guiding principles such as 'do no harm', informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and clarity about the role and responsibility of researchers can advise researchers on how to deal with certain situations. However, as demonstrated by the examples from my fieldwork in Kosovo, strict adherence to such general guidelines is no guarantee to success, and imposing these guidelines on researchers—as institutional review boards tend to—is bound to limit the reach of much-needed ethnographic research. In the end, it is up the researcher to decide which approach is best suited to the circumstances, but it should also be remembered that research projects and the outcomes of a researcher's actions can never be totally managed.

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